

## **Postmodernism and Analysis of the Development Process**

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## **Introduction**

There is a range of methodological approaches which may be taken to analysing the development process. Here we consider how far postmodernism offers a useful methodological foundation.

These two sentences already embody some philosophical principles. The first sentence has elements in common with postmodernism: allowance is made for a range of approaches rather than one best approach, and concern is expressed with process rather than outcome. The second sentence is somewhat at odds with postmodernism, which is normally expressed as not being anti-foundational. The philosophical standpoint of this note, therefore, from the start, embodies the view that postmodernism offers useful insights but that discussion of foundations is helpful for considering different approaches to development analysis.

The field of methodology is concerned with the question of how best to construct knowledge about the real world in order to provide the basis for action. Development economics is a particularly good field in which to consider methodological questions because it is so clearly addressed to policy. Further, the particularity of experience which postmodernism addresses is most evident when considering the range of developing economies being studied. Indeed there has been active discussion in some of the development literature about the relationship between theory and policy addressed to specific contexts in terms of the relative merits of modernism and postmodernism. These issues have been addressed more widely in the methodology literature. We start by providing a brief account of postmodernism from the methodology literature, and then consider its contribution to development studies and development policy-making.

## **Postmodernism**

Categorising postmodernism is itself a challenge. The essence of postmodernism is that general statements cannot be justified. The key work which has inspired much of the development of postmodern thought is Lyotard's (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*; and see Amariglio, Cullenberg and Ruccio (eds) (2001) for a recent collection of papers on postmodernism.

The receptivity to postmodern ideas grew in part out of the challenge to authoritarian epistemology in the 1960s. Thomas Kuhn (1962) had pointed out that empirical falsification of theories had not always, historically, led to theory rejection. Rather, theories were developed within the paradigms of specific scientific communities, whose shared beliefs were challenged only by a realisation of a serious anomaly. While the detail of theories and techniques changed within the 'normal science' of paradigms, changes in belief systems and methodologies only occurred with the 'extraordinary science' which underpinned a paradigm shift. Kuhn referred to this shift as a revolutionary episode. The key feature of such an episode is that there is no neutral basis for comparing theory before and after. If the methodological principles are different, the basis for deciding on good theory and bad theory can only be paradigm-specific. More fundamentally, the paradigms are incommensurate because different meanings are attached to terms and indeed to evidence.

While Kuhn saw himself as describing how science has actually proceeded, with methodological principles specific to paradigms, but with methodological principles nonetheless, he was widely interpreted as being relativist in the sense of denying methodological principle altogether. Quoting Feyerabend, Blaug (1980: 43) described it as the 'anything goes' approach. While Blaug points out that Feyerabend is arguing against universal methodological principles, not methodological principles

in general, he concludes that Feyerabend is replacing the philosophy of science with 'the philosophy of flower power' (Blaug, 1980: 44). This, fairly widespread, interpretation involves a dualism: either we have universal methodological criteria or we have none (see further Dow, 2000, on dualism). But the latter possibility, which had been regarded with horror by those who sought universal methodological principles, was actively embraced by postmodernists. Indeed the term 'nihilism' has subsequently been used by postmodernists themselves in an attempt to capture the essence of postmodernism (see for example Amariglio and Ruccio, 1995). Insofar as postmodernism remains within the dualistic cast of thought of the modernism it is reacting against, postmodernism can be understood as the antithesis of modernism's thesis.

The modernism against which postmodernism was reacting embodies principles which are apparently widely-accepted in economics: science progresses according to agreed methodological principles, relying on mathematical formalist expression of classical logic, set against 'the facts' (Klamer, 1995). Postmodernism stresses rather the particularity of discourses about economic problems and the fragmented, subjective perception of reality. Rather than general theories we need detailed local knowledge and sensitivity to the particularities of individual experience. The implication was that reality itself is fragmented – even the individual self is fragmented. But since our knowledge of reality is itself subjective, changing and fragmented, it is regarded as meaningless to refer to a 'reality'. The focus then is on the level of knowledge, or of discourse – at what level does the particular become the general? There is little scope for methodological discussion, since the fragmented nature of policy issues requires context-specific discussion about how to address them rather than general statements.

It is not clear that postmodernism is sustainable as a basis for analysis even at the local level. The injunction to conduct analysis only at the local level itself represents a methodological position which requires philosophical justification; the problem lies with a philosophy which denies any scope for drawing implications for methodology. In its pure form, postmodernism allows no analysis or meaningful discourse at all – it really would be nihilistic. So we need to consider instead elements of postmodernism which may contribute to our understanding, without taking on board postmodernism in its entirety. There is in fact a postmodern discourse which does make general points about paying attention to context, drawing on different disciplines, and so on. Indeed it is hard to imagine *any* discourse without some kind of shared understanding of terms, of the nature of problems, and so on. The issue for constructing analysis for policy-making is the *scope* of the sharing – we normally think of paradigms as being identified with wider communities than simply the local. The issue for development economics is whether there is scope for discourse which goes beyond very specific local circumstances and individual experience.

### **Modernism and Postmodernism in Development Economics**

In development economics it has been possible to identify broad shifts in methodological approach over the last fifty years. Gore (2000) takes a Kuhnian approach to analysing the emergence of the Washington Consensus, and then to alternative approaches which have been attracting attention in the wake of the challenge posed to the Washington Consensus by the South-East Asia Crisis. The Washington Consensus has all the hallmarks of modernism. It involves a common analysis, drawn from formal modelling, using data sets which lay out 'the facts', for application to all developing countries, resulting in structural adjustment programs

with the common features of emphasis on monetary and fiscal restraint and general market liberalisation. The particularities of the local context are relevant, but only to explanations for the outcome of higher economic growth not having been achieved. Thus for example the explanation for the South-East Asia Crisis was seen as lying in problems of governance in the countries concerned (see for example IMF, 1997).

As Gore points out, the critique of this type of modernist approach which predominated until the 1980s took the dual position, in terms of the relevant domain for analysis and explanation. Analysis for policy-making in developing countries, according to the structuralist/dependency approach, should be formulated within the particular national environment. The global environment is the domain of explanations for the difficulties experienced with implementing locally-devised development strategies. The sustainable human development approach introduces a different set of values, which includes the privileging of local knowledge and participation. But, Gore argues, these values are still expressed within a theoretical perspective that, while emphasising the importance of the local, does so through a meta-narrative. Each of these three approaches thus refers to local conditions in a very different way, and thus seems to have some postmodern elements, but does so within a general theory which smacks of modernism.

Gore characterises what he calls the Southern Consensus of the 1990s (a combination of Latin American neo-structuralism and East Asian developmentalism) as rejecting the notion of grand narratives and general blueprints, basing policy on historical analysis of the country in question and encouraging an interdisciplinary approach. The Southern Consensus thus has more general postmodern characteristics than simply referring to local particularities (for either analysis or explanation). Yet the very specification of an approach at all implies some set of principles of enquiry, which is anathema to postmodernism. Similarly, feminist development economics on the one hand welcomes many aspects of postmodernisms such as the recognition of the difference between women's experience and men's experience, but on the other hand sees postmodernism as preventing any politicisation of feminism because it provides no basis for generalising from particular experience (Parpart and Marchand, 1995).

There has been discussion within the social and economic development literature more generally about the juxtaposition of modernism with postmodernism (see for example Lee, 1994). Modernism is seen, not just as a methodological approach, but also as the general application of a process of modernisation. Development according to this approach is understood as a process through which all economies progress towards a state of economic development. This suggests that economic development can be achieved by proceeding along the lines of the experience of developed countries. Modernism has thus taken two forms: the neo-liberalism of the Washington Consensus, and also what is referred to as historicism. This latter term was (mis)used by Karl Popper (1944-5) to refer to the Marxist stages theories of development. Where a historical approach has been employed to suggest that development follows a deterministic path, then the approach is indeed modernist. It was the prevalence of Marxist theory in economic geography which provided the impetus for the flourishing of postmodernism (see Lash and Urry, 1987).

But there is cause for confusion between historicism in this sense and a historical approach which is designed to take account of the particularities of context, on the grounds that history provides a rich set of case studies from which lessons may be learned (Hodgson, 2001). This latter shares with postmodernism the attention to context and thus the avoidance of meta-narratives independent of context. But by

taking the view that lessons may be learned for adaptation to different contexts, this historical approach departs significantly from any pure form of postmodernism (Dow and Dow, 2001).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a process of modernisation being implemented in developing countries as a condition for credit from the IMF and IBRD, a process which was supported by the Washington Consensus and which fitted into a (modernist) Marxist theory of global capitalism. But this modernisation process for developing countries coincided with an increasing loss of confidence in government intervention in the developed world. Indeed, Lee (1994) focuses on the issues raised by the juxtaposition between the increasingly postmodern culture of developed economies and the modernist modernisation process being undertaken by developing economies. The neo-liberal agenda which emerged for developed countries was for a withdrawal of governments from intervention in market forces. The neo-Austrian view that governments' knowledge was inadequate for intervention was fed into the New Classical economics which dominated macroeconomic policy thinking in the 1980s. This view was reinforced by the apparent failure of the large macroeconometric models (see for example Clements and Hendry, 1995). In developed countries too, therefore, the emphasis was put on the same types of structural adjustment (reducing fiscal deficits, denationalising industry, freeing capital markets, assigning inflation control to the central bank, and so on) as were being required of developing countries, in order to free up market forces.

The growing influence of the cultural trend of postmodernism can be seen in this loss of confidence in the scope for government management of the economy (see Dow, 1991). More generally postmodernism could be seen in the growing awareness of the diversity of experience, among different genders, races and religions. The history of colonialism was being revised to take account of the different experience of the objects of colonial power. In development theory, postmodernism took the form of privileging the knowledge and experience of those in the local situation to which policy was directed. This shifted the focus of analysis away from general solutions, involving a range of disciplines in addition to economics, and incorporating the notion of triangulated solutions whereby a range of analyses are brought to bear on particular problems. Thus postmodernism in developed economies has encouraged a rethinking of the modernist development strategies which developing countries had been urged to follow.

Postmodernism in addition posed a very particular problem with the whole notion of the development 'expert' (Parpart, 1995). Development economics as a field entails the view that some general statements may be made on the subject of development, and that the sharing of knowledge from one experience to another is a key feature of development assistance. If there is no scope for analysis beyond the local context, then there is no scope for development economics.

Further, if that analysis is to take account of external forces which constrain (or indeed enable) development in the local context, then some understanding of these wider forces is required for the analysis to be complete. In developed economies there is a sense within the neo-liberal agenda that, by creating the conditions for free market forces domestically, external forces will be benign. But that view is particularly open to question for developing countries which have much weaker power in global markets. Realistically, doing without economic management by the government is not an option for developing countries. Even if the goal of policy is to reduce dependence on the outside world, policy directed to this end needs to engage with the forces at work in the outside world.

Postmodernism is thus inadequate as a basis for development economics. It has encouraged a welcome attention to the importance of taking account of the diversity of experience, between developed and developing countries, between developing countries, and within developing countries. It has encouraged a focus on local context when designing policy, an openness to the contribution of different disciplines and a sense of modesty in outside ‘experts’. Nevertheless, by ruling out any generality of analysis, and by distracting attention from reality by considering it as ‘discourse’, postmodernism provides no foundation for theoretical analysis; indeed the whole notion of ‘foundations’ is anathema to postmodernism.

But if postmodernism is the antithesis to modernism’s thesis, there is scope for a synthesis to emerge out of this evolutionary opposition of ideas. Indeed in the methodology literature there are signs of just such a synthesis (see for example Hands (2001). In particular critical realism offers a synthesis by combining a Marxist approach to realism with a fallibilism which owes much to postmodern thinking (Dow, 2002). Critical realists are concerned with the real, but recognise the limited access we have to knowledge of underlying causal mechanisms (Lawson, 1997). It combines a recognition of the lessons we can learn from history – specifically developing ideas of causal mechanisms through a process of retrodution from experience – with an awareness of the particularities of history and the range of discourses by which it may be analysed.

## **Conclusion**

Postmodernism can be seen as being an important stage in the development of thought arising out of modernism. It represents a reaction to the idea that it is feasible to identify the one best way of understanding both the nature of theorising and the ‘facts’ of economic development, of constructing theory and of applying policy. As such postmodernism ushered in constructive developments in thought which had particularly important application to development economics: an awareness of diversity of experience, understanding and discourse – the very subject-matter of development economics; an awareness of the need to take account of different types of analysis in formulating policy; and an awareness of the limitations on outside expertise.

But postmodernism lacks any foundation for theorising because, in its pure form, it denies the very notion of foundations and also any scope for generalising from fragmented experience. In practise, postmodernists, when addressing real questions, depart from the strictures of postmodernism, as they must if they are to make any kind of non-particular statement and if they are to communicate successfully with others in the development economics community. What we are seeing, therefore, is the next stage in a dialectical process, whereby elements of both modernism and postmodernism are synthesised in a way which goes beyond dualism.

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